

Article 38—Allowing two-family homes in single family residential zones Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is this Article on the Warrant? What will it accomplish if adopted?

There is a severe housing shortage in the Boston region, resulting in rapid escalation of housing prices and rents. Job growth is vastly outpacing housing growth. The sponsors of this Article believe that zoning is one of the things holding back increasing housing supply to meet demand. This Article if adopted will allow a modest increase in housing, and will have a minimal impact on the appearance of our neighborhoods. Here's what it will do.

- It increases housing choices, i.e. produces smaller units, attractive to empty-nesters, new families, smaller households. This is something not being produced in the market today. Two-family homes can be rental or homeownership.
- Building 2 homes in the same footprint as a large single-family home has a smaller environmental footprint per household. Two families live in the same land area as a single family.
- Building homes where there is already infrastructure and near MBTA service is also more environmentally sustainable. Building farther away from jobs and services results in more driving, more traffic, and more carbon emissions, and can mean clearing land that is now forested or agricultural.
- This proposal does not change the allowable footprint, setbacks, height or open space requirements. Housing produced under this bylaw will fit into the fabric of the neighborhood. There are already many 2-family homes in single family zones.

2. Has this been tried anywhere else?

Minneapolis outlawed single family zoning in 2018. In 2020-2021, there were 10 conversions from single-family to two-family homes, and 20 new construction 2-family structures in formerly single-family zones, so 30 units total, out of 188,000 units. A comparable number for Arlington is 3 new units over 2 years (.016%). In addition to Minneapolis, Oregon permits two-family homes by right in cities of over 10,000 people, California allows an additional dwelling on single-family parcels by right, and Cambridge is in the process of looking at eliminating single- and two-family restrictions.

3. Why the 1,850 sq ft. limit on unit size as part of this article?

The MA Department of Housing and Community Development defines a Starter Home as "not exceeding 1,850 square feet in heated living area." This article is meant to produce more modestly sized unit. The median house size of new single-family homes built during the last decade is 3,440 sf. This limit will result in units approximately half that size.

4. Will 2-family homes be allowed on undersized lots?

The rules for undersized lots (aka non-conforming lots) allow changes only within the existing foundation. The structure will not be allowed to increase in size or get closer to the lot lines by right. Any change that increases the size would have to go before the Zoning Board of Appeals.

5. What will be the traffic and parking impact?

In a regional sense traffic congestion will be improved if we build housing close to jobs, transit, and existing infrastructure instead of in the farther-out suburbs and small towns. Building housing near transit means people don't need to drive as much. Two-family homes have the same parking requirement as single-family homes—one space per unit. There will continue to be no overnight parking on the street.
6. What is the impact on infrastructure and impervious surface?

Two-family homes have the same requirements for open space and setbacks from the lot lines as single-family homes. Arlington's requirements for storm water management are higher now than when most of our housing was built. Our DPW has opined that our infrastructure is adequate for our needs into the future. Our population is significantly smaller than it was a few decades ago, and our infrastructure has been upgraded in that time.
7. Will neighbors be notified before there is new construction in their neighborhood?

Arlington requires that neighbors be notified whenever there is demolition, new construction, or large additions over 750 sf. Contractors are required to provide information on starting date, construction hours, rules for noise, trash and other site conditions, and provide contact information. This is the same for single and for two-family homes, and is known as "The Good Neighbor Agreement".
8. Will this amendment increase teardowns?

Teardowns are happening now in every part of town. Wouldn't it be better to replace the buildings currently being torn down with the kind of modest housing choices we need? If this proposal isn't adopted, we will continue our current trend of large single-family homes replacing more modest homes.
9. What will the impact be on property taxes?

Replacing a single-family home with a 2-family home will increase the tax base, according to the Assessors' Office. This means it is considered "new growth", which adds revenue for the town without increasing anyone's taxes.
10. Could a developer add two Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), to end up with 4 units in a very large building?

No. The ADU bylaw requires one of the units to be owner occupied, with an affidavit of residency, before a building permit is issued. A developer could not provide this before a building permit is issued. The proposed amendment does not change the rules for ADU's, which are limited to 900 sf. The requirements for height (35', 2.5 stories), open space, and setbacks make it unlikely that the physical space is available to build this theoretical structure.
11. Aren't we dense enough?

We believe these changes will benefit Arlington by providing more homes and smaller homes, and by increasing the tax base. It will help us to build a more vibrant community that serves the entire life cycle. Two-family homes allow us to welcome households with different housing needs, from different generations, and different economic abilities to share our vibrant community.

Feel free to contact us to learn more.

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See pictures on next page.

Article 38—Allowing two family homes in single family zones

Before and After Pictures:

27-29 Tanager

Before (single family)



After (two-family house)



177 Mountain Ave

Before (single family house)



After (single family house)

